

October 9, 1871:
The Burning of Chicago

Poems of the Great Chicago Fire
Collected and Arranged by
Francis J. Gerty



Chicago
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The Great Fire in Chicago

October 8, 9, 10, 1871

October ninth is a day to be remembered in Chicago's history for upon that day, in the year of 1871, the great Chicago fire raged at its highest. Late in the evening of the eighth the fire had started in Dekoven Street and aided by a strong southwest wind it swept away the wooden structures in the neighborhood and was soon beyond control. Then for two nights and two days it mowed its awful way through the greatest city of the West, leaving behind it a scene of smoldering ruin such as has seldom been witnessed.

The sight must have been a truly terrible one. Imagine an area of three and one-third square miles, black and smoking, covered with cracked and darkened stone, twisted pipes and charred beams, with fragments of brick walls standing here and there as the only tombstones for the two hundred and fifty who lost their lives, and you have some slight picture of the desolation that followed the fire. Almost one hundred thousand were driven from their homes. Over 17,000 buildings were destroyed, including all of those in

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the business section. On seventy-three miles of streets not a single habitation was left standing.

The sympathy of the entire world was aroused and help came from all quarters. The work of rebuilding began at once. In a year buildings having ten miles of frontage, and costing \$18,000,000 had replaced the ruins. During the panic of 1873 the Chicago banks alone, of those of all the large cities, were not compelled to issue certificates of deposits instead of paying out funds. In three years a far greater city had replaced the one destroyed by fire. Catastrophe had only served to show Chicago's strength. Cast to the ground she rose ten-fold powerful and fairer than ever.



John Boyle O'Reilly

A Poem, "Chicago"

Gaunt in the midst of the prairie,
She who was once so fair;
Charred and rent are her garments,
Heavy and dark like cerements;
Silent, but round her the air
Plaintively wails, "Miserere!"

Proud like a beautiful maiden,
Art-like from forehead to feet,
Was she till pressed like a leman
Close to the breast of the demon,
Lusting for one so sweet,
So were her shoulders laden.

Friends she had, rich in her treasures:
Shall the old taunt be true,—
Fallen, they turn their cold faces,
Seeking new wealth-gilded places,
Saying we never knew
Aught of her smiles or her pleasures?

Silent she stands on the prairie,
Wrapped in her fire-scathed sheet:
Around her, thank God, is the Nation,
Weeping for her desolation,
Pouring its gold at her feet,
Answering her "Miserere!"

Three

Dwight Williams

A Poem, "Chicago in Flames"

Hark! Hark! Hark!

From the midnight's hush and dark,

Hear a wild cry of fear

Rising on the atmosphere;

Weird and shrill the echo flies,

Louder, hoarser clamours rise;

Now a red gleam skyward darts,

Quickly throb a thousand hearts;

Now they gather on the street,

Dismal tread of tramping feet

Fire! FIRE!! FIRE!!!

Peal! Peal! Peal!

Bells of brass and bells of steel;

How they ring an awful chime

Through the dismal midnight time;

How the fiery demon gloats,

How he scorns the brazen throats

Which the dauntless firemen aim

At his surging bands of flame;

Ah! but fire is king to-night,

And waters yield the fight.

Higher, higher, higher,

Like a tempest sweeps the fire.

Street to street,

Like a raid of horsemen fleet,

Four

John Greenleaf Whittier

Fair seemed the old; but fairer still
The new the dreary void shall fill
With dearer homes than those
 o'erthrown,
For love shall lay each corner-stone.

Rise, stricken city!—from thee throw
The ashen sackcloth of thy woe;
And build as to Amphion's strain,
To songs of cheer thy walls again.

How shrivelled in thy hot distress
The primal sin of selfishness!
How instant rose, to take thy part,
The angel in the human heart!

Ah! not in vain the flames that tossed
Above thy dreadful holocaust;
The Christ again has preached through
 thee
The Gospel of Humanity.

Then lift once more thy towers on high,
And fret with spires the western sky,
To tell that God is yet with us,
And love is still miraculous.

Edgar Allen Poe

from "The Bells"

Hear the loud alarum-bells—
Brazen bells!
What a tale of terror, now, their
turbulency tells!
In the startled ear of night
How they scream out their affright!
Too much horrified to speak,
They can only shriek, shriek,
Out of tune,
In a clamorous appeal to the mercy of
the fire,
In a mad expostulation with the deaf and
frantic fire.
Leaping higher, higher,
With a desperate desire
And a resolute endeavor
Now—now to sit, or never,
By the side of the pale-faced moon.



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